

Historical Association

Survey of History in Secondary Schools in England 2019

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1. Summary

1.1 Data on which this report is based

This online survey was launched in August 2019, just after the publication of the A-level and GCSE results, and closed in October. Responses were received from 285 history teachers working in 278 different schools, including 213 non-selective, state-maintained schools, 15 grammar schools, 32 independent schools, four sixth-form colleges and three special schools or pupil referral units. Three-quarters of the respondents had been teaching for at least five years and two-thirds were either heads of department (57%) or senior leaders (9%), so the opinions reported here tend to reflect those of experienced practitioners.

1.2 Key Stage 3 history

Continuing impact of the revised National Curriculum

The proportion of state-funded schools (36%) that claim to follow the National Curriculum *closely* is somewhat higher in 2019 than among 2018 respondents (27%), which may reflect changes to the Ofsted education inspection framework, which places a new emphasis on the 'quality of education'.

Approaches adopted to assessment at Key Stage 3

GCSE-style grading is still the dominant model being used to evaluate and report on students' achievement at Key Stage 3. Overall, nearly half of state-funded schools report that they use a GCSE-style model. The majority of schools require tracking data to be submitted at three points in the year, although 40% of independent schools have much more frequent tracking, with six data-collection points. The influence of GCSE on approaches used within Key Stage 3 is also evident in the fact that the most frequently used forms of assessment activity are extended written tasks (used by 65% of respondents); GCSE-style source questions (used by 57%); and GCSE-style written questions *not* based on sources (used by 55%). There is also an emphasis on short factual knowledge tests, used by 47% of respondents, reflecting an emphasis placed on securing knowledge through regular retrieval practice.

While the vast majority of history departments have a high degree of control over the form of assessment within their subject, the timing of assessment points is generally determined more centrally within schools.

The impact of GCSE and of the new Ofsted inspection framework on Key Stage 3

The majority of teachers continue to report that the demands of the GCSE specifications have an influence on the kinds of questions that they set at Key Stage 3, on the way in which they use sources and on their teaching of historical interpretations. However, the proportion acknowledging this impact

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is considerably lower than in the past two years in relation to the types of question asked (56% in 2019 compared with 79% in 2018) and to the way in which sources are used (59% in 2019 compared with 68% in 2018). The impact of GCSE on the Key Stage 3 curriculum remains more pronounced in state-funded non-selective schools than it is in the grammar or independent school sectors.

There are other signs that tendencies to treat Key Stage 3 as the start of a five-year GCSE programme are also diminishing. Fewer than 40% of comprehensives, academies and free schools in 2019 report deliberately planning their Key Stage 3 and GCSE curricula in ways that allow them to revisit content, compared with 46% of such schools in 2018. Nearly a quarter now report that they specifically devise their Key Stage 3 curriculum to *avoid* repetition and to broaden students' encounters with the past. State-funded non-selective schools are, however, still more likely than grammar or independent school respondents to acknowledge that they address concerns about content coverage at GCSE either by revisiting content or by choosing content that will provide relevant contextual knowledge for the topics studied at GCSE. While the proportion of schools that now include teaching on different timescales within their Key Stage 3 curriculum is higher this year (43% of state-funded non-selective schools, compared with 33% last year), the proportion of all schools that deliberately include teaching of local history or some aspect of the historic environment remains much smaller and is virtually unchanged at 18%.

There is some evidence that the reduction of the direct influence of GCSE on Key Stage 3 curriculum design is a reflection of the new Ofsted education inspection framework. Respondents from about half of the state-maintained schools claim that the framework now has a 'considerable' or 'profound' impact on the planning of their Key Stage 3 curriculum. This impact is generally well regarded, with three-quarters of teachers in the state-maintained sector claiming that they regard the new framework positively.

The length of the Key Stage 3 curriculum

The proportion of comprehensive, academy and free schools that report offering a three-year Key Stage 3 curriculum is similar to that reported in 2017 and 2018, at around 57%. While previous surveys asked respondents whether they had a two-year or a three-year Key Stage 3, the 2019 survey allowed them to indicate more precisely whether they began teaching the GCSE specification part-way through Year 9. Responses in this category suggest that around 13% of schools have taken this option (although the proportion here varies depending on whether the question is framed specifically about the length of Key Stage 3 or about the length of GCSE). What is clear is that 30% of state-funded non-selective schools are allowing students to give up history at the end of Year 8.

1.3 Provision at Key Stage 4

Teachers' views of the GCSE (9–1) specification

Teachers remain very concerned about the suitability of the GCSE specifications for many young people: 90% of teachers disagree with the claim that the current specifications are appropriate for those with low levels of literacy and 70% disagree with the suggestion that they are appropriate for those with low prior attainment.

Respondents continue to appreciate the range of content (i.e. the fact that the specifications include the study of history from three different periods and across different timescales), but only 20% regard

the amount of content as manageable. Thirty per cent of schools claimed that they were unable to fit the content they had to cover into the time available.

In terms of specific concerns related to particular examination boards, the issues raised most frequently by those taking the AQA specification focused on the thematic study and the historic environment element, while those taking Edexcel most commonly raised concerns about the amount of content in Paper 2 (which comprises both the British depth study and the period study) and the 'narrative account' questions. Very few comments were received from those working with other examination boards (reflecting the smaller number of entries), which makes it very difficult to assess their typicality, but multiple concerns were raised within OCR's SHP specification about the period study 'The Making of America' and about the historical environment unit ('History Around Us'), and within Eduqas about the thematic unit.

The length of time allocated to GCSE

The reported difficulty in addressing all the content occurs in a context in which 30% of respondents allocate a full three years to teaching GCSE (9–1) history, while a further 20% allocate some part of their Year 9 curriculum time to teaching the GCSE specification.³

While a small majority of schools (54%) report that they have left the length of their GCSE courses unchanged in the past three years, one-third report that they have lengthened the course. Only 12% report a reduction. These proportions seem to reflect decisions made in response to the introduction of the 9–1 GCSEs (first examined in 2017), with some influence of the new Ofsted education inspection framework beginning to be felt.

The pathway systems at GCSE and the extent to which students can choose history

The pattern of option systems is essentially unchanged from previous years. Around 40% of schools require that *all* students take at least one of the two EBacc humanities subjects (i.e. history or geography) and generally also allow students to take both if they wish. Another 10% of schools make this a requirement for *some* students. Just under half of schools claim that they seek to give students an entirely free choice about whether or not they study history at GCSE.

Around 30% of all school respondents acknowledge that they actively prevent or discourage certain students from taking history. Although there are some differences in terms of the *range* of reasons for steering students away from history (with only 6% reporting that students are placed on a pathway in which history does not feature as an option), there is no change in the overall proportion of schools steering some students away from the subject, which remains entirely consistent with what has been reported in the past two years. The main reasons reported for discouraging or preventing students from taking history are that their levels of literacy are too low for history to be an accessible qualification (10%) or that their current attainment is too low for it to be regarded as worthwhile (8%).

1.4 A-level history

³ As noted above, the proportions vary depending on whether the question is asked in relation to Key Stage 3 or 4. This is because the *total* number of schools answering each batch of questions is different. Some middle schools, for example, teach Key Stage 3 students but not Key Stage 4, while some independent schools only receive pupils at age 13.

The proportion of students within Years 12 and 13 taking A-level history

Although there are some indications across all types of school that more schools are teaching smaller cohorts of students – with 28% of schools reporting that their Year 12 classes include less than 10% of the cohort, compared with 23% last year – uptake essentially appears to be fluctuating, with no stable patterns.

Time allocation

The figures for time allocated to face-to-face teaching appear to be lower than in previous years, with 47% of schools reporting a time allocation of five or more hours, compared with 61% reporting that allocation last year. Independent schools provide the most time, with 54% of respondents reporting that they offer five or more hours of history teaching a week, followed by comprehensive, academy and free schools, with 46% reporting that they provide this amount of teaching.

Concerns expressed about particular units

The most common issue raised when respondents were invited to comment on any specific concerns about A-level related to the quality and consistency of marking, which was often linked to non-exam assessments, followed by comments on the amount of detailed knowledge that students were expected to deal with. Some teachers felt that the weighting of the exams did not reflect the amount of material that students were expected to deal with in different units, while others were concerned that the exam questions focused on very narrow aspects of a topic, and did not allow students to demonstrate the range of knowledge that they had developed.

1.5 School history and diversity

One-fifth of schools reported that students from certain ethnic backgrounds are either somewhat or significantly under-represented or do not tend to take history at GCSE. The figure is around a third at A-level. Our questions about uptake were asked in response to the Royal Historical Society's (2018) 'Race, ethnicity and equality report', which drew attention to both the narrowness of the school curriculum and the under-representation of BAME students studying history. Most HA survey respondents report a close match between the proportion of students from different backgrounds who opt to study history and the proportion of students from such backgrounds within their school population. Where teachers noted that there was some kind of under-representation, they identified Chinese, Asian, Black and Roma students as being less likely to take history. Of the few who offered any explanations for this pattern, teachers mentioned that Chinese and Asian students were more likely to take STEM subjects at A-level.

Where schools claimed to have been successful in attracting large numbers of minority ethnic students, teachers were asked to suggest what they thought were the reasons for this success. The 15 responses to this question focused variously on the quality of teaching (which resulted in students achieving high grades); on making history relevant to the lives of students; and on selecting topics that reflected a more inclusive curriculum.

Schools were asked about any specific recent changes that they had made in response to the RHS report, or more generally to include a more diverse representation of people in the past or to engage a wider pool of students. Approximately one-third of schools claimed to have made some change of

this kind in the past two years, with most highlighting changes to the topics included within their curriculum, particularly within Key Stage 3, which seemed to offer the most scope for change. While reference was most commonly made to trying to ensure that students learned more about Africa than simply its involvement in the transatlantic slave trade, different schools highlighted different emphases, including India, China and the Middle East, as well as a deliberate focus on Black British history. The inclusion of women's lives in the past was also a prominent theme, and a few schools also made specific reference to the history of LGBT people.

1.6 Teachers' concerns

The predominant concerns reported by teachers are the impact of budget cuts on their students' experience of history (identified as a current or serious concern by 51% of respondents); the lack of opportunity to attend subject-specific CPD (a current or serious concern for 40% of respondents); and the lack of provision of history-specific CPD (a current or serious concern for 36% of respondents). More than a quarter of respondents regard the lack of high-quality applicants for history posts as a current or serious concern. Almost a quarter are also concerned about the amount of history being taught by non-specialist teachers.

The impact of budget cuts

One of the most notable impacts of budget cuts is on class size. Overall, nearly a third of schools report increasing class sizes at Key Stage 3 and GCSE as a response to financial pressures. This is most evident in state-funded non-selective schools, with 44% reporting increased class sizes at Key Stage 3 and 39% at GCSE.

A less common response, but of considerable concern where it is happening, is reduction in teaching time. Ten per cent of comprehensives, academies and free schools report having cut teaching time at Key Stage 3, with 5% having to do the same at GCSE.

Budget cuts have also had an impact on schools' ability to purchase textbooks and photocopy resources. A quarter of teachers in state-funded non-selective schools report that they have had to buy essential classroom resources from their own money due to financial constraints in school.

The provision of teaching assistants in history

A deeply worrying impact of budget cuts is the reduction in support from teaching assistants (TAs). Nearly two-thirds of comprehensives, academies and free schools report reductions in this provision at Key Stage 3 and half at GCSE. Given the important role that such staff can play in supporting students' progress and the additional pressures that teachers face without appropriate provision for those with special educational needs, this move has profound implications for many young people.

In 2019, just under 60% of schools reported that they were unable to provide regular TA support in Key Stage 3 for students with a formal statement of needs (an Education and Health Care plan, or EHCP). Where students in Key Stage 3 with special needs do not have an EHCP, only 5% of schools offer regular support from a TA. At GCSE, less than 40% of schools are able to provide support on at least a regular basis, even for those *with* an EHCP. Where students do not have an EHCP, only 5% of state-funded non-selective schools reported being able to provide any regular form of TA support, compared with almost 10% in 2018.

1.7 History teacher qualifications and recruitment

Nearly 17% of the state-funded non-selective schools reported that they employ history teachers without qualified teacher status (QTS). This proportion is much higher than that found in last year's survey (7%) and is much closer than in previous years to the proportion of independent schools (20%) that report employing history teachers without a formal teaching qualification. While the total may include a significant number who are undertaking employment-based salaried training programmes, the fact that many children are being taught history by unqualified teachers is a matter of real concern.

The high proportion of schools employing unqualified history teachers may also reflect the continuing difficulties that schools have with recruitment. Of the 93 schools that had advertised a history vacancy during the academic year 2018–19, only 34% reported having received a 'good field of applicants' (a proportion similar to that found the previous year). Almost 8% of the state-maintained non-selective schools reported that they had been unable to recruit or chose not to appoint any of the applicants.